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ABSTRACT

This testimony reports on the state of program evaluation in the field of drug education for youth. The report focuses on the role of evaluation in: (1) the Department of Education's program of grants to states and local school districts under the Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act (DFSCA) of 1986, as amended; (2) the department's Drug-Free School Recognition Program; and (3) in other, promising, comprehensive community-based programs. Information in the report came from the Department of Education, interviews with officials and the examination of documents such as states' biennial DFSCA progress reports, application forms and reviewer resumes in the Recognition Program, and contractor evaluation reports. The report looks separately at the role of evaluation in each of the three areas listed above and notes that there is slow progress in establishing the results of sizable federal funding, or in learning what works in the field of drug abuse prevention for youth. It is concluded that the field of drug abuse prevention for youth faces two major challenges of evaluation method and capacity: determining the results of prevention programs and stimulating evaluation by state and local agencies. (NB)

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DRUG EDUCATION

Limited Progress in Program Evaluation

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to be here today to provide updated information on the state of program evaluation in the field of drug education for youth. Your invitation asked us to review developments since our earlier reports, specifically on the role of evaluation

-- in the Department of Education's program of grants to states and local school districts under the Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act (DFSCA) of 1986, as amended,

-- in the department's Drug-Free School Recognition Program, and

-- in other, promising, comprehensive community-based programs.

To prepare this testimony, we gathered new information from the Department of Education. We interviewed officials and reviewed documents such as states' biennial DFSCA progress reports, application forms and reviewer resumes in the Recognition Program, and contractor evaluation reports.

In summary, we found slow progress in establishing the results of sizable federal funding, or more generally, in learning what works in the field of drug abuse prevention for youth. I will amplify this observation as I address each of the three areas you asked about in turn.

EVALUATION OF SCHOOLS' ACTIVITIES UNDER DFSCA

The 1989 amendments to the act required states to evaluate the effectiveness of local district programs and also required districts to report to the state on the method used to evaluate their own efforts and the results of such evaluation.[1]

Our Earlier Findings on Evaluation

In a 1990 evaluation, we reviewed what school districts were doing under the act in 1988-89 and concluded that little was known at the local, state, or national level about what approach works best or how effectively the various programs and curricula

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[1]Funds are distributed annually to the states via the state education agency (SEA) and the governor's office. Ninety percent of funds allotted to the SEA under the act are to be further distributed by a formula to local school districts (and also intermediate educational agencies or consortia of districts). The SEAs and governors' offices may use the funds for a variety of authorized activities.

reduce or prevent drug and alcohol use among students.[2] For example, the six big school districts we visited had not determined the effectiveness of their DFSCA programs.

In our report, we quoted the predictions of department and school district officials that good evaluation was so difficult and costly that, in response to the strengthened evaluation requirements in the law, states would use readily available but weak indicators of student drug use, such as number of drug-related arrests, referrals, or school suspensions. Also, officials in the states and districts we visited planned to continue to report results in terms of numbers of participants or their opinions without assessing behavior. Our 1990 report noted that some gains in knowledge might be expected in the future from a number of evaluation-related activities sponsored by the department, including:

-- contracting for a study of successful programs,

-- contracting for a longitudinal study of the effectiveness of funded projects, and

-- preparing a handbook to give guidance on evaluation to state and local drug education projects.

Department Contractor Findings on Evaluation

Also several years ago, a contractor examined evaluation at the state and local level, among other activities under DFSCA, from the passage of the act in 1986 through 1988-89. The contractor reported little activity, and what little there was centered on process and implementation, not results. The contractor also reported that staff in local programs at that time recognized the need for evaluation and wanted more direction about how to do it. The contractor recommended that the SEAs' and governors' programs use a substantial portion of their administrative funds under the act to strengthen monitoring, technical assistance, and evaluation, and that the department provide guidance to grantees on evaluation activities suited to different levels of resources.[3]

Activity and Progress Since the Earlier Reports

Little progress has occurred in every respect. None of the

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[2]Drug Education: School-Based Programs Seen as Useful but Impact Unknown (GAO/HRD-91-27, November 28, 1990).

[3]A Study of the Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act. Report on State and Local Programs: Executive Summary (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, January 1992), pp. E-21, E-26.

activities mentioned in our earlier report has produced any results as yet. The study of successful programs yielded no empirical findings the department could publish, and the effectiveness study is years away from reporting results (due in late 1995). The evaluation handbook has still not been issued. The department has not taken any significant action on either of the recommendations made by the contractor.[4] Regional centers authorized under the act to provide training to schools and others working on prevention have offered workshops and consulted with projects on evaluation, but the department could not identify any guidance making that topic a priority.

We looked to see if anything had changed in state and local evaluation owing to the increased requirements in the 1989 amendments. We first asked the department what they had learned from the evaluation data in the states' biennial reports. Officials said there were not enough staff with time to read them, and in any case, they had little incentive to consider the information, as they lack authority to deny funding based on any shortcomings of either reporting or performance. The department contracted with an outside firm to read the states' reports but will not get a summary or analysis until late this year, more than a year after the reports arrived in Washington.

We therefore read some of the most recent reports ourselves, to see what states reported now that evaluation is required. We read reports submitted in 1992, covering 1989-91, from 10 states

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[4]The department has generally given very little guidance on evaluation. The department has not issued regulations for DFSCA programs, but it has addressed how much evaluation is enough each year. Nonregulatory guidance issued in lieu of regulations on December 11, 1992, included a question about how a state should fulfill its annual evaluation responsibility. The department answered that states "must evaluate a significant number of programs each year" so that after 2 years the state "must have evaluated the effectiveness of all...." The department gave no further guidance as to what would be a satisfactory evaluation.

Department officials gave as one reason for not offering more guidance to DFSCA programs about evaluation design or outcome measures that the statute uses only the single word "effectiveness" without elaboration. The statute does not, however, prohibit the department from suggesting alternatives for evaluating effectiveness.

chosen at random.[5]

We found the same weaknesses in study design and data that observers saw in past years. Of the 10 states, only 3 reported that they evaluated local programs' effectiveness, and their methods were not strong.[6] In addition, three states said that local districts had evaluated program effectiveness, but methods again were weak in two of these three. The states' biennial reports of their own evaluations of projects under the governors' segment of DFSCA showed somewhat more activity (with five states reporting completing effectiveness studies in the period 1989-91). But we judged the methods here weak again; no report described effective programs based on sound data. All 10 of the states reported they had done statewide surveys of youth drug use. Some claimed they drew conclusions about the impact of programs from these survey findings of declining drug use rates--a design or approach we judge unsound chiefly because so many factors other than the programs can affect an entire state's aggregate youth drug use rates.

Conclusions and Observations

The scale of federal investment--$1.5 billion in the last 3 years alone for the SEA and governors' programs--requires better progress in evaluation than we have observed. Seven of the 10 state reports we reviewed listed no evaluation of local programs in the 2-year period. Where we saw some evaluation, the methods used were weak, producing little reliable information. For its

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[5]The 10 states we reviewed had collectively received $170.3 million for SEA and local school district activity under DFSCA in fiscal years 1990 and 1991, the period covered by the reports we reviewed. This is about 23 percent of the total allocated to all states for these purposes (i.e. excluding the governors' funds). The largest state we examined had received $76.8 million in those 2 years; the smallest, $3.7 million.

[6]The evaluation methods reported by these three states were: state agency staff observing during visits; interviewing and surveying of school administrators; collecting student opinions in focus groups; and tallying local reports of objectives achieved.

part, the department has virtually ignored this shortfall.[7]

The fundamental barrier to more and better evaluation is the fact that funds are mostly allocated by formula--without any need to know what works. Arguably such a funding scheme, up to now, was needed to support building a broad base of capability (through purchase of materials, training, and so on). But now may be the time for a new approach that includes more deliberate targeting.[8] Thus, the Congress could split the allocation of funds. Part of the funds would flow, as before, by formula to states and districts (that would allow continuation of some level of activity everywhere). The remainder would be awarded upon evidence of continuing need and of increasing targeting of resources on programs of proven effectiveness. The statute could direct that states award funds for local school districts in a parallel fashion, with a base amount for ongoing activity and a discretionary amount based on need, plans, and results. Use of evaluation data would thus be necessary within regular decisions at every level. The incentive is small for improving evaluation quantity or quality when it is not tied to the receipt of funds but is seen as serving only to meet a federal requirement.

In addition, the Congress could change the statute to give

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[7]Department officials repeated to us their view (stated originally at the time of our 1990 report cited above) that local prevention program evaluation is extremely difficult. We continue to disagree. Evaluations need not involve sophisticated details such as random assignment of students or elaborate measurements. We think it is not beyond the resources of many schools, for example, to take careful measures of what services students received, together with assessment of whether the intended results were achieved (effects on knowledge, attitudes, or behaviors other than drug use). Comparison is crucial as well, and can be done in many ways including repeated measures on those involved, as well as comparison to students not involved or past trends. The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) has published a useful step-by-step guide showing the feasibility of local evaluation, Prevention Plus III: Assessing Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention Programs at the School and Community Level (Washington, D.C.: HHS, 1991). The guide was drawn from materials originally prepared by one of the Department of Education's regional centers.

[8]Responsible officials of the Department of Education provided comments on the preliminary findings and conclusions from the new data-gathering reported throughout this statement. We incorporated their comments where appropriate. The officials declined to comment on the alternative funding approach suggested below until the department's reauthorization proposal is submitted.

priority to evaluation among the activities authorized for states' administrative funds from the act, and to add evaluation training and assistance as a priority among the tasks of the regional centers.

The national evaluation already under way by the Department of Education is a good start, but much more could be done to strengthen evaluation even with no change in law. The fact that the law mentions only the one word "effectiveness" in describing the nature of the required evaluation allows the department to encourage a wide range of measures of effectiveness to be used. And targeted attention to a few key areas could pay off, also. Three states account for 25 percent of DFSCA state grant funds and seven states for 42 percent, so much could be learned by improved evaluation in those states alone.

EVALUATION IN THE DRUG-FREE SCHOOL RECOGNITION PROGRAM

The picture is brighter here, as the department has been more active in directing the evaluation approach used in giving out these national citations of merit and has taken a number of important steps to respond to our critique of past methods.[9]

How the Program Works

The Recognition Program was established by the department in 1987 to demonstrate, by example, the creation of safe, disciplined, and drug-free schools and to offer models from which others could learn. Public and private elementary and secondary schools are eligible, but must be nominated through a state education agency or any of several other specific sources designated by the department. Panels of teachers, parents, law enforcement officials, evaluation and research experts, and community organization members review applications, visit the top-ranked schools to check their claims in the application, and make final recommendations to the Secretary. The department awards no funds to the winners, only praise and publicity. (Recognized schools are invited to showcase their activities in regional and national meetings for the benefit of others, and the department puts out publications on the models.)

Our Earlier Review of the Recognition Process

After we examined in 1991 how the department evaluated applicants for recognition, we made a number of recommendations. One was to eliminate a policy that restricted the types of programs eligible, another was to widen the nomination process.

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[9]Drug Abuse Prevention: Federal Efforts to Identify Exemplary Programs Need Stronger Design (GAO/PEMD-91-15, August 22, 1991).

We also recommended adding reviewers with research and evaluation qualifications, clarifying the criteria and data to be used to evaluate programs, and eliminating some questionable steps in the decision-making process.

Most important, we found the department did not require that effectiveness be demonstrated, and we recommended that that be an unambiguous criterion. Under the past procedure, the public and educators interested in what works could not be assured that recognized programs did indeed cause valued outcomes.

Progress Since Our Report

The department has continued the program since our review of the 1989-90 cycle, completing two more cycles and awarding 126 recognitions among 313 nominees; the 6th cycle is under way now, with 144 nominees from 32 states. We wanted to see if we could have any more confidence that--as a result of improved evaluation--this year's awards will truly signify programs that not only made a good effort but also had beneficial effects that would not have happened otherwise.

In brief, the chances of that are better, and the results are promising. The department has made significant progress correcting the problems we identified in its evaluation approach.[10] First, the application package has been revised. A school that wants to be recognized is on notice that a review criterion will be "documented evidence that it is making progress in reducing" drug use and incidents of violence and disruptive behavior. The applicant must address this criterion by answering a question about the "concrete evidence that your program is effective" and must discuss the "evaluation design, data collection instruments, and empirical indicators of success."

Second, department officials told us they have added to each review panel an individual with training or experience in social science research or evaluation, as we recommended. We reviewed the resumes of the 10 individuals involved in the current cycle. Only 1 of the 10 lacked relevant capabilities (academic degrees or experience) for judging empirical evidence of effectiveness.

Two of our staff independently reviewed the evaluation section of five applications in the current cycle without knowing the review panels' decisions whether or not to proceed with a site visit. These two reached complete agreement, which suggests

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[10]Other areas have shown mixed progress on our recommendations. Nominations are more broadly and systematically sought and the separate Steering Committee that acted (without any additional evaluation information) as a second review panel, has been eliminated. The eligibility policy, however, is unchanged.

that at least the process yields interpretable evidence. We agreed that three applicants had enough evaluation evidence to warrant the next step of review, while two did not. We then confirmed that our views aligned in all five cases with those of the panel. Of course, we did not have the resources to review a large enough group of applications to reach general conclusions about the current review process, but the trends are promising in the gathering and use of evaluation data. We have no additional suggestions for improved evaluation to make at this time.

EVALUATION OF COMPREHENSIVE COMMUNITY-BASED PREVENTION PROGRAMS

At your request, we studied these programs for early adolescents in 1990, using both a national survey of 138 programs reported to be exemplary and observations of 10 of them.[11] We hoped to find effective models of this type of program, since the approach is widely advocated. General features that distinguish this approach to prevention include addressing multiple dimensions of youths' lives (family, peer group, school, and community) and using a variety of services. The wide public interest in such programs is suggested by the demand for our report; it was one of the top 10 "best sellers" among all GAO's reports in 1992.

Our Earlier Findings on These Programs

As you recall, we called some of the programs "promising," since they appeared, on interim measures such as participants' involvement and program completion rates, to be doing well in achieving preconditions of long-term impact. This allowed us to note six features of those programs that deserved the attention of others designing drug abuse prevention efforts. But we found the programs rarely conducted evaluations that would be necessary to show whether or not they were effective in reducing or preventing alcohol and drug use. This lack of evidence, we believe, has hindered the programs' own development and refinement, slowed the overall development of the field, and--since the information gap persists--limited the information we have today to aid the Subcommittee in considering authorizations for different types of prevention efforts.

About three quarters of the programs of this type that we surveyed received federal funds, so we noted a potential federal role in strengthening evaluation. We specifically recommended that the Department of Education finish the evaluation handbook

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[11]Adolescent Drug Use Prevention: Common Features of Promising Community Programs (GAO/PEMD-92-2, January 16, 1992).

for DFSCA grantees discussed above.[12]

More generally, our report raised for congressional consideration the reluctance of programs to spend scarce service funds on evaluation, and we suggested that if the Congress wants to learn more about the effectiveness of such efforts, special funds might be set aside for national evaluations.

Further Progress in Learning What Works In This Type of Program

Unfortunately, here again we cannot report much progress in the growth of our understanding about the effectiveness of these programs. Some new information on community-based programs generally will come from a section of the department's DFSCA outcomes study. The contractor is collecting data over time on the outcomes of 10 such programs funded under the governors' section of the act. Two of our staff independently examined the selected programs and agreed that three programs were somewhat similar to those we studied in that they were targeted to youth, comprehensive, and community-based. Results of this study will not be ready until 1995.[13]

We also reviewed the evaluation section of 10 state biennial progress reports on governors' programs to see if projects in the "high-risk youth" funding category had been the subject of any of the modest evaluation activity we reported above. As noted, only half the states said they had completed effectiveness evaluations of any activity under the governor's funding. Of those, one state reported contracting for a study of high-risk youth projects, but gave no results; the others reported no pertinent evaluations.

Conclusion and Observation

Again, the department has provided little guidance that would help these especially complicated programs do affordable evaluation, although there may be modest progress once that

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[12]The handbook would help some of the kinds of programs we studied, as they can be DFSCA grantees under the governors' program where part of the funds must be used for "innovative community-based programs of coordinated services for high-risk youth." The Office of Substance Abuse Prevention, now called the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention, in the Department of Health and Human Services also sponsored such projects at the time of our review and had relevant evaluation materials under development.

[13]The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation is supporting a national study of comprehensive prevention programs.

guidance (the handbook) is produced. Only modest funding is potentially available, however, for community programs for high-risk youth in the governors' part of the act, which suggests this group of funded programs may never be the basis for learning a great deal about such programs. Thus, we conclude that for the Congress to know more about the effects of such programs, a national study will need to be requested, or even mandated, since it appears none will happen otherwise. Whatever department is tasked with the work (Education or HHS), other departments and agencies funding relevant projects should also be required to be involved. These programs cross many lines.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATION

In sum, we think this field clearly faces two major challenges of evaluation method and capacity: (1) determining the results of prevention programs, and (2) stimulating evaluation by state and local agencies. These two are always hard to do, and progress has been limited. One can still be optimistic, however, about effective prevention, even in the face of this lack of evidence. We have found promising efforts; others have successfully met the evaluative challenge; and with so much programmatic activity, it seems reasonable to believe that there are effective efforts in schools and communities to be measured, understood, and replicated. Progress in evaluation is essential, and it is certainly more difficult when a funding agency gives scant guidance. Yet major funding needs to rest on evidence of impact.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.

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